In 1854, Alexander McRae wrote two letters to the Deseret News newspaper describing what life had been like in the Liberty, Missouri Jail during his imprisonment with Joseph Smith and others from December 1, 1838 until April 6, 1839. In these letters he writes about cruelties they endured and how trusting in Joseph saved them.

Deseret News
Salt Lake City, Utah
October 9, 1854

Mr. Editor:—In reading the History of Joseph Smith as published in the News last winter, and especially that part of it which relates to his imprisonment in Liberty jail, Missouri, I see there are many interesting facts which are omitted; and as I had the honor of being a fellow prisoner with him, I thought I would write some of those incidents for the satisfaction of any of your readers who may feel interested in them.

During our imprisonment, we had many visitors, both friends and enemies. Among the latter, many were angry with Brother Joseph, and accused him of killing a son, a brother, or some relative of theirs, at what was called the Crooked River Battle. This looked rather strange to me, that so many should claim a son, or a brother killed there, when they reported only one man killed.

Among our friends who visited us, were Presidents Brigham Young and Heber C. Kimball [now—i.e. at the time this letter was written, 1854], of the First Presidency—the latter several times; George A. Smith, of the quorum of the Twelve; Don C. Smith, brother of Joseph, came several times, and brought some of our families to see us. Benjamin Covey, Bishop of the Twelfth Ward of this city, brought each of us a new pair of boots, and made us a present of them. James Sloan, his wife and daughter, came several times. Alanson Ripley also visited us, and many others, whom to name would be too tedious. Orin P. Rockwell brought us refreshments many times; and Jane Bleven and her daughter brought cakes, pies, etc., and handed them in at the window. These things helped us much, as our food was very coarse, and so filthy that we could not eat it until we were driven to it by hunger.

After we had been there some time, and had tried every means we could to obtain our liberty by the law, without effect (except Sidney Rigdon who was bailed out), and also having heard, from a reliable source, that it had been stated in the public street, by the most influential men in that part of the country, that “the Mormon prisoners would have to be condemned or the character of the state would have to go down,” we came to the conclusion that we would try other means to effect it.

Accordingly, on the 7th day of February, 1839, after counseling together on the subject, we concluded to try to go that evening when the jailer came with our supper; but Brother Hyrum, before deciding fully, and to make it more sure, asked Brother Joseph to inquire of the Lord as to the propriety of the move. He did so, and received answer to this effect—that if we were all agreed, we could go clear that evening; and if we would ask, we should have a testimony for ourselves. I immediately
asked, and had not no more than asked, until I received as clear a testimony as ever I did of anything in my life, that it was true. Brother Hyrum Smith and Caleb Baldwin bore testimony to the same: but Lyman Wight said we might go if we chose, but he would not. After talking with him for some time, he said, “if we would wait until the next day, he would go with us.” Without thinking we had no promise of success on any other day than the one above stated, we agreed to wait.

When night came, the jailer came alone with our supper, threw the door wide open, put our supper on the table, and went to the back part of the room, where a pile of books lay, took up a book, and went to reading, leaving us between him and the door, thereby giving us every chance to go if we had been ready. As the next day was agreed upon, we made no attempt to go that evening.

When the next evening came, the case was very different; the jailer brought a double guard with him and with them six of our brethren, to-wit.: Erastus Snow, William D. Huntington, Cyrus Daniels, David Holeman, Alanson Ripley and Watson Barlow. I was afterwards informed that they were sent by the Church. The jailer seemed to be badly scared; he had the door locked and everything made secure. It looked like a bad chance to get away, but we were determined to try it; so when the jailer started out, we started too. Brother Hyrum took hold of the door, and the rest followed; but before we were able to render him the assistance he needed, the jailer and guard succeeded in closing the door, shutting the brethren in with us, except Cyrus Daniels, who was on the outside.

As soon as the attempt was made inside, he took two of the guards, one under each arm, and ran down the stairs that led to the door, it being in the second story. When he reached the ground they got away from him; and seeing we had failed to get out, he started to run, but put his foot in a hole and fell, a bullet from one of the guards passed very close to his head, and he thinks the fall saved his life.

The scene that followed this defies description. I should judge, from the number, that all the town, and many from the country, gathered around the jail, and
every mode of torture and death that their imagination could fancy, was proposed for us, such as blowing up the jail, taking us out and whipping us to death, shooting us, burning us to death, tearing us to pieces with horses, etc. But they were so divided among themselves that they could not carry out any of their plans, and we escaped unhurt.

During this time, some of our brethren spoke of our being in great danger; and I confess I felt that we were. But Brother Joseph told them “not to fear, that not a hair of their heads should be hurt, and that they should not lose any of their things, even to a bridle, saddle, or blanket; that everything should be restored to them; they had offered their lives for us and the Gospel; that it was necessary the Church should offer a sacrifice, and the Lord accepted the offering.”

The brethren had next to undergo a trial, but the excitement was so great that they [the officers] dare not take them out until it abated a little. While they were waiting for their trial, some of the brethren employed lawyers to defend them. Brother [Erastus] Snow asked Brother Joseph whether he had better employ a lawyer or not. Brother Joseph told him to plead his own case. “But,” said Brother Snow, “I do not understand the law.” Brother Joseph asked him if he did not understand justice; he thought he did. “Well,” said Brother Joseph, “go and plead for justice as hard as you can, and quote Blackstone and other authors now and then, and they will take it all for law.”

He did as he was told, and the result was as Joseph had said it would be; for when he got through his plea, the lawyers flocked around him, and asked him where he had studied law, and said they had never heard a better plea. When the trial was over Brother Snow was discharged, and all the rest were held to bail, and were allowed to bail each other, by Brother Snow going bail with them; and they said they got everything that was taken from them, and nothing was lost, although no two articles were in one place. More anon.

Yours respectfully,
Alexander McRae

Note: Cyrus Daniels succeeded in escaping. The other brethren were charged with attempted escape. They were held in the Liberty Jail until February 13, 1839. At that time they were taken to court in Liberty. Erastus Snow successfully plead his case and was released. The other four prisoners: William D. Huntington, David Holeman, Alanson Ripley and Watson Barlow were released after posting $150 bail each.

Deseret News
Salt Lake City, Utah
November 1, 1854

Mr. Editor:
Sometime during our stay in Liberty jail an attempt was made to destroy us by poison. I supposed it was administered in either tea or coffee, but as I did not use either, I escaped unhurt, while all who did were sorely afflicted, some being blind two or three days, and it was only by much faith and prayer that the effect was overcome.

We never suffered ourselves to go into any important measure without asking Brother Joseph to inquire of the Lord in relation to it. Such was our confidence in him as a Prophet, that when he said “Thus saith the Lord,” we were confident it would be as he said; and the more we tried it, the more confidence we had, for we never found his word fail in a single instance.

A short time before we were to go to Davies county for trial, word came to us that either General Atchi-
son or Doniphan, would raise a military force, and go with us to protect us from the wrath of that people. The matter was discussed by the brethren (except Brother Joseph), and they naturally enough concluded it would be best; and although I had nothing to say, I concurred with them in my feelings. Brother Hyrum asked Brother Joseph what he thought of it. Brother Joseph hung his head a few moments, and seemed in a deep study, and then raised up and said, “Brother Hyrum, it will not do; we must trust in the Lord; if we take a guard with us we shall be destroyed.”

This was very unexpected to us, but Brother Hyrum remarked, “If you say it in the name of the Lord, we will rely on it.” Said Brother Joseph, “In the name of the Lord, if we take a guard with us, we will be destroyed; but if we put our trust in the Lord, we shall be safe, and no harm shall befall us, and we shall be better treated than we have ever been since we have been prisoners.”

This settled the question, and all seemed satisfied, and it was decided that we should have no extra guard, and they had only such a guard as they chose for our safe keeping. When we arrived at the place where the court was held, I began to think he was mistaken for once, for the people rushed upon us en masse, crying, “Kill them, kill them, kill them.” I could see no chance for escape, unless we could fight our way through, and we had nothing to do it with. At this, Brother Joseph, at whom all seemed to rush, rose up and said, “We are in your hands; if we are guilty, we refuse not to be punished by the law.” Hearing these words, two of the most bitter mobocrats in the country--one by the name of William Peniston and the other Kinney, or McKinney, I do not remember which--got up on benches and began to speak to the people, saying, “Yes, gentlemen, these men are in our hands; let us not use violence, but let the law have its course; the law will condemn them, and they will be punished by it. We do not want the disgrace of taking the law into our own hands.”

In a very few minutes they were quieted, and they seemed now as friendly as they had a few minutes before been enraged. Liquor was procured, and we all had to drink in token of friendship. This took place in the court-room (a small log cabin about twelve feet square), during the adjournment of the court; and from that time until we got away, they could not put a guard over us who would not become so friendly that they dare not trust them, and the guard was very frequently changed. We were seated at the first table with the judge, lawyers, etc., and had the best the country afforded, with feather beds to sleep on--a privilege we had not before enjoyed in all our imprisonment.

On one occasion, while we were there, the above-named William Peniston, partly in joke and partly in earnest, threw out a rather hard insinuation against some of the brethren. This touched Joseph's feelings, and he retorted a good deal in the same way, only with such power that the earth seemed to tremble under this feet, and said, “Your heart is as black as your whiskers,” which were as black as any crow. He seemed to quake under it and left the room.

The guards, who had become friendly, were alarmed for our safety, and exclaimed, “O, Mr. Smith, do not talk so; you will bring trouble upon yourself and companions.” Brother Joseph replied, “Do not be alarmed; I know what I am about.” He always took up for the brethren, when their characters were assailed, sooner than for himself, no matter how unpopular it was to speak in their favor.

Yours as ever,
Alexander McRae